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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how basic principles of child development can be used to guide the formation and evaluation of educational policies. Child development principles are those beliefs that, predicated on empirical research, have developed over time. They are generally accepted by child development specialists as the minimum elements necessary for healthy child growth and development. They can and have been used to shape educational decisions primarily at the implementation level, but their utility is not limited to this sphere alone. A discussion of five principles is used to explicate their utility. The five principles are: (1) children benefit if they experience a sense of continuity between the time periods and spheres of their lives; (2) children and families vary on every measurable characteristic, and so have diverse needs; (3) full human development incorporates and integrates intellectual, social, emotional, and physical domains; (4) the family is the most important influence on child development, but many institutions, including the school, the community, and the media, affect children's growth; and (5) children who experience an environment that falls below some minimal level of quality are badly damaged by such an environment. (Author/BW)

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From Child Development Knowledge To Educational Practice: An Open Door?

by

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This paper explores how basic principles of child development can be used to guide the formation and evaluation of educational policies. Before discussing the mechanics of how this can be done, an explanation of why it should be considered is necessary. Recent history clearly reveals that educational policy has been strongly influenced by an array of social needs, coupled with political causes. Recall that in the 1950's, post-sputnik, education policies were drastically modified to redress perceived deficiencies in our academic training - deficiencies that could potentially threaten our national security. Policies of the 1960's were predicated on a commitment to eliminate social inequities prevalent, not only in our schools, but in society. Recently, as in the past, schools have served society; their policies framed by societal needs. But recently we have witnessed the rise of an increased federal role in education, manifested by increased federal financial support, increased regulations and programs, expanded research and broader educational constituencies. Coupled with education as societal arbitrator and education as big business, the industry became conflict-riden, harboring desperate views about its very purposes (secular humanism vs back to basics), about who should fund and who should control education. It is no wonder that the educational establishment has been accused of falling prey to educational fads, of lacking a clear direction. Essentially, it marches to different drummers, often concurrently.

Rather than rooting educational policy and practice in good intentions, fashionable trends or in political maneuverings, this paper suggests that several simple, but fundamental principles can guide educators while the pendulum swings.

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Child development knowledge can provide the basis, the inviolate premises against which educational priorities and cuts can be argued.

This is not to say that using child development principles as one criteria for educational policy-making will eliminate or minimize educational debate. Like the constitution itself, the structure of American education remains flexible and adaptable. It has been designed precisely to accommodate societal trends, to permit query, to admit responsiveness. Rather than it's weakness, these are its strengths. By the same token, education's inherent flexibility demands that minimum principles be maintained.

What is meant by child development principles? How can they be used to guide educational decisions? What kinds of decisions? Decisions for whom? The remainder of the paper will address these questions. Child development principles are those beliefs, that predicated on empirical research, have developed over time. Although no commission has voted their approval, they are generally accepted by child development specialists as the minimum elements necessary for healthy child growth and development for young children. They can and have been used to shape educational decisions primarily at the implementation level, but their utility is not limited to this sphere alone. A discussion of the principles and some examples will explicate their utility.

The principles are:

CONTINUITY

Children benefit if they experience a sense of continuity between (a) the time periods of their lives and (b) the spheres of their lives.

HETEROGENEITY

Children and families are heterogeneous and they vary on every measurable characteristic. Due to this variability, children and families have diverse needs.

FULL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Human development involves more than cognitive development. Full human development incorporates and integrates intellectual, social, emotional and physical domains.

FAMILY AND INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCE

The most important influence on the total development of young children is the family, but many institutions, including the school, the community and the media, affect children's growth.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Children who experience an environment that falls below some minimal level of quality are badly damaged by such an environment.

It should be noted that for the sake of clarity, the five principles are discussed separately, although they are often interrelated.

A. CONTINUITY

Children benefit if they experience a sense of continuity between (a) the time periods of their lives and (b) the spheres of their lives.

As a young child moves from subject to subject, activity to activity, from one year to the next, he should experience continuity in his elementary schooling. In practice continuity should exist in curricular and disciplinary procedure. In this sense, continuity does not mean sameness. The same activities and the same disciplinary strategies are clearly not appropriate for every age child. Rather, developmentally appropriate activities should be available, activities that are consistent in orientation and built upon skills already mastered. Similarly, disciplinary procedures should be age appropriate and fairly consistent from teacher to teacher. Ideally, curricular and disciplinary activities would be guided by an over-arching educational philosophy.

Beyond the need for "internal" continuity within a single school, schools and districts need to establish links with the child's home and other institutions. As children enter the educational system, their transition from home to school should be made to be as easy as possible - parent orientations and visitations for children prior to the beginning of school help the child to adapt to a new situation.

Children and families also function at the juncture of many institutions. This is particularly true of children from low-income families who may receive services from a number of agencies. Networking efforts with other service providers are essential if continuity is to be ensured. In an era of educational expansion, one promising approach to promoting continuity in the lives of children and their parents was the development of information and referral registries. By voluntarily registering, parents obtained information on health services, parenting education, day care, and other community services. In accessing available community services, the registry accomplished several things concurrently. Parents began to feel familiar with the school in which the registry was based. Pre-school children who accompanied their parents to school frequently witnessed productive interactions between parents and school personnel, making the school less threatening while readying them for their own entry.

With the growing number of working mothers, after-school care is currently cited as a pressing need. By alleviating the revolving door of babysitters and curtailing the growing numbers of "latch-key" children, after-school care promotes continuity of care for the youngsters. This is not to say that schools are the best place for an after-school program or that to promote optimal continuity, care must be in school facilities. To the contrary, educators <u>cannot</u> provide all the services, but they can act as advocates to see that care is provided within the community. Assisting in

the development of these services in the community promotes continuity and supports the child's development.

B. HETEROGENEITY

Children and families are heterogeneous and they vary on every measurable characteristic. Due to this variability, children and families have diverse needs.

Children's heterogeneity has long been acknowledged in educational circles. The cry for individualized instruction and the development of federal initiatives on behalf of handicapped, economically disadvantaged, and non-English speaking children were predicated on this realization.

But beyond specific programs, there must be a general acceptance of differences in children's learning styles. As the diversity of the public school population continues to expand, we must incorporate various instructional strategies that are designed to accommodate different learning styles. Similarly, it is no longer enough to be satisfied with minority faces on the pages of basal texts or the addition of a minority studies unit to a social studies curriculum. Frequently, the curriculum and the processes of instruction must be altered to incorporate, not in an add-on fashion, the socio-cultural heritage of all youngsters.

Programmatic diversity is needed not only for students, but for their families as well. Options for involving parents in schools must be created so that differing needs and schedules are considered. Not all parents can or want to be involved in school-decision making. Similarly, not all parents have the time to volunteer regularly in classes. A comprehensive program of parent participation must include opportunities for parent involvement in social or fund-raising activities, educational activities, school support activities (e.g., volunteering) and decision-making activities. Recognizing the diverse needs of parents is fundamental to a productive parent-school collaboration.

The need to accommodate diversity exists in every facet of the educational enterprise. It affects decisions made by boards of education as well as decisions made by teachers in their classrooms. Greater attention to this basic principle should yield greater flexibility, a variety of strategies, and options in the educational context.

C. FULL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Human development involves more than cognitive development. Full human development incorporates and integrates intellectual, social, emotional and physical domains.

Commonly referred to as the "whole child" principle, this axiom speaks to the need to fully incorporate social, emotional, physical and intellectual domains into all facets of school life. Curriculum must be created to reflect this comprehensive approach to education. The recent emphasis on reading and math - the 'back to basics' movement - is acceptable as long as it occurs within a context that is committed to full human development.

Unfortunately, all too frequently concern with children's emotional needs is considered an educational fringe. We know that children of parents who are divorcing undergo tremendous stress. As such, concern in this arena is legitimate. Schools must not close their eyes to social problems, but rather retain commitment to meeting the needs of stressed populations.

Physical development is another important aspect of the 'whole child' approach. A particularly frustrating dimension of children's medical care in America is that an estimated 40 million American children receive inadequate health care, some failing to receive basic innoculations against an array of potentially crippling or fatal diseases. While schools cannot become the major provider of health care, they can alter the conventional approaches to meeting the health needs of children. Curricula are being adapted to incorporate sections on health and nutrition, self-health care and nutrition education, are but two examples.

On another level, if the mission of education is to prepare a child for life, then we must acknowledge that academic tests alone are inadequate measures of success. Along with child development researchers, educators can help minimize undue emphasis on cognitive gains by focusing on the development of instruments that will also assess children's social competence, and by advocating for broad-based program criteria.

D. FAMILY AND INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCE

The most important influence on the total development of young children is the family, but many institutions, including the school, the community and the media, affect children's growth.

Inherent in this principle is the recognition that many institutions are involved in the child's life, and that the school is but one. Schools therefore must stand ready to collaborate with parents, with families and with other agencies that educate: museums, libraries, and community agencies. The school cannot disassociate itself from important institutions, technological and societal movements. Rather, school personnel and policy-makers must remain abreast of the myriad of factors that influence children.

If we agree that the most important influence on a child is the family, then schools must develop mechanisms that support the families' capacity to parent effectively. Schools can provide or they can stimulate the provision of parenting education within the community. While much has been written about parent involvement, in many districts, parents remain isolated from their children's teachers and schools. School personnel must accommodate the varying schedules of working parents, and must consider vehicles to meaningfully involve parents in school life.

Beyond the family, various business and governmental policies affect children. School cannot make corporations more sensitive to the needs of single-parent families. Schools cannot alter public policies that affect

children (WIC, Food Stamps, AFDC). Yet certainly educators can keep abreast of changing economic and political trends. Professional educational literature should widen its perspective beyond classroom-related issues and educators vote. The educational community must flex its political muscle on behalf of children and families. Educators must coalesce to take stands not only on issues directly related to schools, but on issues related to child and family well-being. Ultimately the general welfare of children in America is an educational issue.

E. ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Children who experience an environment that falls below some minimal level of quality are badly damaged by such an environment.

Because young children's personalities are shaped by many factors, it is often expedient to fail to view the full context of the growing child. By environment, I mean the milieu in which the child lives. That milieu may be the actual facility--the home or the school--or it may be the child's sense of that arena--his social and non-social environments. In referring to facilities that meet minimum standards of physical quality, I'm concerned primarily about institutions. All facilities for children must be physically safe. Minimum regulations must be preserved, and where no regulations exist, they must be created. Children simply cannot be left to die in day care centers (as recently happened in an Atlanta fire) because of inadequate regulation.

Schools must play a much greater role in educating children about accident prevention. Beyond the routine fire evacuation drills, information about gun safety, burn prevention, and traffic safety should be distributed. Children must be guided toward a shared role in creating a safe physical environment.

More elusive than environmental faults that can easily be corrected, the occurrence of child abuse in this society is a problem that significantly shapes a child's psychological environment. In this area, parents are usually labeled as primary perpetrators, but, in practice, some school policies socially sanction child abuse. The mere existence of corporal punishment is a tacit acceptance of violence and physical aggression as an appropriate model for human interaction. As long as this milieu persists, efforts to prevent child abuse will be limited. Ultimately, the establishment of a safe environment begins with the availability of parent and teacher education and a school climate conducive to dialogue and cooperation.

Taken in total, these ideas represent a life-time of work. They have been suggested only as illustrations of how child development principles can be translated to effect educational practice. While important in era of expension of educational efforts, using the principles as a guide for program curtailment or consolidation is as salient. Given necessary budget cuts, programs under review could be measured for efficacy not simply on cost or participant's test scores, but also against a standard of efficient adherence to basic principles of what's necessary and good for children. Ultimately, we must move beyond money and test scores as the criteria for educational practice. Let us use what we know - the best and most current knowledge we possess.